DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 393 102 CS 215 245

AUTHOR Flores, Juan
TITLE Authentic Multiculturalism and Nontraditional Students: Voices from the "Contact Zone."
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS American Indians; Community Colleges; *Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Differences; Higher Education; Latin American Literature; *Multicultural Education; Nontraditional Students; United States Literature; *Western Civilization; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Cultural Studies; Literary Canon

ABSTRACT

New multicultural anthologies too often end up looking suspiciously like the color palate of a paint-by-numbers kit. Canonical tokenism is quickly seen as a ruse by minority students and teachers who are circumspect and adept at uncovering counterfeits. As an alternative to tokenism, one recommendation is to use Patricia Bizzell's "contact zone" as a major theme in constructing a year-long pedagogical application of legitimizing cultural literature, seeking not only to impart a global education to students but also to foster cognitive grace by reconstructing Western study to naturally include historic participants of color in the loci of chronicled events and thereby authenticate their contributions. The course gives due weight to the study of the mainstream, traditional canon. Entering community college students have little grasp of history and hardly any knowledge concerning Western thought. Hence, comparative readings and discussions involve philosophy, religion, commercialization, industry, politics, and the revolutionary ethics instrumental in the West's political and economic metamorphosis. In the first portion of the course, specific authors include Max Weber, Charles Darwin, Frederic Jameson, E. L. Doctorow, Maxine Hong-Kingston, and John Fowles. Having established that ordinate relationships exist, the course's second section examines examples of cultural negotiation and authentication. In the third section, the course initiates a study of Latino and Native American Folk stories and poems. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Flores

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 393 102

Authentic Multiculturalism and Nontraditional Students:

Voices From the "*Contact Zone*"

by Juan Flores

One day my eleven-year old son asked, "Who decides what will be studied as history?" His question served as a reminder that the premise for a critical understanding of any historic event is through the authentic dialogue of all parties involved. Without authentic dialogue, knowledge must be imparted through the monocultural i.e. highly suspect soliloquy of one voice. Cultural inclusion in the loci of historical narrative sustains a "first-class seat" in mainstream culture, or what I have come to term for my freshman writers as "cognitive grace." Conversely, cognitive disgrace fosters oppression or exclusion from historical narrative, and its corollary seen in the low educational success rate of Latino, African, and Native Americans. Remembering Socrates, the problem is that their lives seem unworthy of living because they remain unexamined.

The incorporation of multicultural literature in the writing classroom presents a perplexing riddle. While our American paradigm earnestly seeks critical thought from our students, it simultaneously focuses on active learning situations that use culturally significant literature to develop critical reading and writing skills. But, as an educator with new anthologies in hand, I am frustrated by the unauthentic answer to the riddle: an ad hoc assembly of authors, too often looking suspiciously like the color-palate of a paint-by-numbers kit. This new

CS215245

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

canonical tokenism is quickly seen as a ruse by minority students and teachers alike who are circumspect and adept at uncovering such counterfeits.

In the February 1994 edition of College English, rhetoric and compositionalist Patricia Bizzell proposes that a new method of incorporating multicultural literature in the English classroom may be accomplished through the study of events where cultures interact. Borrowing from Mary Louise Pratt, Bizzell categorizes these moments as "Contact Zones": instead of asking, for example, how to fit Frederick Douglass into an American Renaissance course, Bizzell writes that we should ask how to reconceive our study so that Douglass is naturally regarded as the important writer that he is (Bizzell 1994). Applied as a pedagogy, this focused study circumvents canonical tokenism, while offering an authenticating direction for our discipline.

Counterfeiting authenticity is not foreign to South Texan Chicanos like me. As brown-skinned choir boys in grade school, we sang a fan-fair of Texican songs, like "Texas, Our Texas," designed to inspire a kind of monoculturalism: "We come your children true. Proclaiming our allegiance, Our faith, Our love for you." (Texas Almanac 1994). Yet, no matter how I or my Chicano compadres tried to harmonize our feelings with words like these, something remained uncomfortable for us. Despite our own authentic, cultural contributions that sprang from names like Zavala, Hinojosa, and Gonzalez, we were not the authenticated and valued hosts whose White ancestries endorsed "historic

inclusion." We had no connection with Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie or Sam Houston. Any connection we thought we had concerned another side: history and movies told us so. "Our" was not inclusive of us; it was a left handed "invitation" that encouraged in many of us Latinos a negative self-image and an internal resentment. Our melting pot is not so thin and soupy as many would think; it is big and chunky, embodying raw cultures of segregation and poverty.

There is, then, little question why many Latino students will not enjoy the passionate interest in Texican war heros like Sam Houston or Jim Bowie. More abstractive and foreign extensions like Charles Dickens, Dylan Thomas, or Robert Frost are in fact literary heroes whose voices do not echo the experiences of the Latino, the African, or the Native American. Like Bowie and Crockett, they contrarily embody a dominant culture's experiences, reminding many of us of color that we are without cognitive grace. As one African-American student once asked me, "How can I understand Dylan Thomas when I am not White nor Welsh nor male?" It is a question deeply rooted in her need to be socially and legitimately recognized--her need for authentication.

My experiences as an instructor of General Education courses, adult literacy programs, reading-writing at a local prison, and an English college instructor, and homeschooler have made me cognizant about placing carts before horses: sacrificing the practice of critical thought for the hardly significant

knowledge of the variant, subsidiary models used to foster it. Our American system of education needs to seek real dialogue from all sides involved, both present and past, for such exchange not only authenticates the teacher's life but that of the student as well. When lately, for example, my son asked me if I would listen to his new CD bearing a name having something to do with broken pumpkins, I waived him off and said, "I'll listen later." Yet I had faithfully asked him, as part of homeschooling, to listen to the works of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart. He was seeking a personal inclusion in the contributory acts of our educational moments together, and I was denying him that right. In authenticating the personal as well as individual cultures of our students, men and women, boys and girls, we must seek the authentic dialogue of all participants from all sides and coming in all guises.' We must place horses before carts. So long as the subject-approach is inclusive of the learner, critical thinking is a more personal matter, and knowledge needs first be personal before becoming integral to the learner.

Our statistical student profile at Del Mar College is vastly different from that of most academies. Take, for example, a typical Del Mar College student: an impoverished Latina, 27 years old, who is a single-parent and the first of her family to attend college. Seven out of ten like her begin at developmental levels, and given four years, only one in ten will ever graduate. She is from the "West Side" of Corpus Christi where neighborhoods are addressed as "barrios" or "colonias"--the initial tie that

extends beyond her family. She is a service industry employee at minimum wage, and college is an embarrassing dream that she is likely to quit due to work and children. Hers is a world of different priorities: hand-to-mouth first; college study only when financial windfalls permit. In the internal makings of her familial home she has been nurtured with images of defeat; she is socially authenticated with freak-show media images of gang-affiliation, third world poverty, and recent statistics of genetic inferiority. From my years of teaching in South Texas, I understand her as a living irony, the epitome of the American paradox: "Pull your own self up by your own bootstraps--bootstraps you are not allowed to have."

My student profile is a living example of Pratt and Bizzell's contact zone, one of the many veritable human "arenas" where diverse cultures have contended to interpret an historic placement. From a sociological perspective, she experiences diffusion, the acquisition of social elements from the dominant culture in order to survive. On a psychological level, she knows confusion, the state of being that seeks, but is without, cognitive grace. This absence of communal grace fosters low-to-no self-esteem in native Latino and African-American Texans, principally characterized by a personal sense of estrangement and ineptitude.

Hence, it was with the Contact Zone as a major theme that I constructed a year-long pedagogical application of legitimizing "cultural literature," seeking not only to impart a global

education to students of my Contact Zone classes, but to foster cognitive grace by reconstructing Western study to naturally include historic participants of color in the loci of chronicled events and thereby authenticate their contributions. Furthermore, student input concerning the direction of the course and its particulars was encouraged. It was no accident that our readings were socio-political in nature, selected to stretch the boundaries of a typical freshman writing curriculum to include psychology, sociology, American history, philosophy and religion. My first Accommodating Reader began with the somewhat nostalgic "The Times They are A'Changing," and in the fall and spring semesters of 1994 and 1995, I launched four freshman rhetoric and composition courses with the contact zone as theme.

Firstly, we cannot ignore the study of the "mainstream," traditional, Western "Canon." Entering community college students have little grasp of history and hardly any knowledge concerning Western thought. Hence, our comparative readings and discussions involved philosophy, religion, commercialization, industry, politics, and the revolutionary ethics instrumental in the West's political and economic metamorphosis. Since contact zones pivot on diffusive relationships, initially my concern was to model for students an era where such relationships were intense: The Industrial Metamorphosis of the 20th Century. I provided a review of Western Thought with a special emphasis on ordinate relationships based on class, gender, race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation.

In the first portion of our semester, we discussed and read works by Max Weber, Charles Darwin, and Frederic Jameson, E.L. Doctorow, Maxine Hong-Kingston, and John Fowles. We made connections with Social Darwinism, Nietzsche, and Marxism. We made more extensive connections through Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx and Engels, Studs Terkel, and even Paulo Freire. In a sense, my classrooms were working think-tanks of researchers, all with separate missions but a singular purpose--to seek, find, and examine Western causal relationships where ever we could find them.

Student essays, initiated from such rich assemblies, went beyond simple, canonical explication. And however laden with errors of grammar and logic, contact zone papers read with depth and passion that comes from authentic, academic discovery. The titles of their essays went beyond what I normally see in composition classes: "An explication On Nietzsche's Critical Statement that God is Dead"; "A Comparative Analysis of Modern and Post-Modern Architecture"; and, "A Description of Natural Law Concerning Moral Values With Help From Rousseau and Hobbes."

Hilda Sanchez, a 52 year-old Latina woman in my course expressed in one essay that her own plight was similar to that of Maxine Hong-Kingston. From her abstract:

> Throughout history, culture has served as a medium for the representation of feminine mystique. It is still very difficult to explain the mystery of woman as a separate self. The need for a woman to grow is no different than

that of a man, yet the oppression that ensues reveals a limited image of womanhood. The actual basis for this "difference" is the fact that the possibility for a true self-realization has not existed until now.

Having established that ordinate relationships exist, we began the second portion of our semester exchanging examples of cultural negotiation and authentication. The Americas have always been a cluster of divergent cultures grappling for domination, so culturally significant people in literature and art are easily found. Historic, cultural figures like Pocohantas, Sacajawea, and Marina (Mexican spouse of conquistador Hernando Cortez) were discussed. Dialogue and essays became pleasingly analytical when we initiated our study with two 18th century Viceregal paintings by Miguel Cabera and Jose Joaquin Magon over their "Depictions of Racial Mixtures" (San Antonio Express-News 1991). Here we were debating authenticity as provided through social and political media. In Magon's painting, for example, is inscribed, "Spanish father and Mestiza mother produce a Quadroon daughter." In the foreground of the painting there is a round table between a European husband and his Mestiza wife holding their child: "... the three figures necessary for the representation of 'mestizaje' [mixed family]" (1991). From an essay by one student Mark Bueno, he writes:

> Magon purposely divides his painting to show how husband and wife are from different cultures. On the left hand side ...the man is surrounded by paper, pen, and ink indicating

> that he was raised to be educated.... On the other side, the woman is surrounded with food, flowers, and pottery showing that she was raised in a culture that demands her to be home....

Students like Bueno were fascinated by slides representing culture interchange. Dialogue not only indicated that they had identified the divergent cultures of the sexes and their social authentication, but of men and women from separate geographic realities and the subjectivity of the artist instilling the images. Dialogue and essay writing went beyond symbolism; we discussed the socio-psychological factors behind such historic artifacts. Some other students, like Jessica Bates, even pulled the boundaries back home into a more personal arena. From Bates' essay, "Women, A Subordinate Culture to Men," she writes:

> The subordination of women starts at an early age with girls being taught that their role is to be a wife and mother. This type of socialization is described in the poem "Barbie Doll" by Marge Piercy...This type of parenting was acceptable many years ago, but times are changing and girls need to be taught the skills they will need to survive in today's world.

Thirdly, we initiated a study of Latino and Native American Folk stories and poems. Contact zone pedagogy, of natural course, includes a plethora of cultural themes, imagery, symbols, irony -- all the elements needed for literature analysis. I used Robert Frost's "Birches" and Jose Limon's "Frost in the Rio

Grande Valley" to teach students that dominant images have a greater meaning than our initial perception (Trevino 1977). From Robert Frost's "Birches":

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been bending them.

Most South Texans have never have seen a birch tree, much less an ice storm; although, it is doubtful that many New Englanders have swung from thorny mesquites or tasted the smoky sweetness of its sticky sap.

In "Birches," the narrator negotiates from within. He day-dreams, crosses reality with fantasy, but truth asserts its claims at the expense of his fancy (Hart 1982). Though the narrator likes to think that "boys been swinging them," he knows that "ice storms do" that (Frost 1972). Over Frost's poem, definitions and explanations were anxiously fostered from my students, but they were all naturally adept at uncovering the symbolism, word puns, and irony built into Limon's poem:

When I see mesquites bend to left and right
Across the line of a straighter, darker river,
I'd like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay,
Only my ancestors did that,
Hanging,
Slowly
at mid-day.

In the glare of the suns of Texas. (Limon 1977)

Limon's piece symbolizes "the harsh historical fact that numerous innocent Mexican-Americans were lynched in the Texas Valley, particularly during the early 1900s" (Trevino 1977). Mesquites, are large and thorny at the banks of South Texan rivers, and Limon, like Frost, likes to dream of them as bent by "boy's...swinging them," there is, however, the harsher reality. In this same vein but over the authenticity of the vaquero or cowboy, Richard Mondragon in his final examination wrote:

> The original American cowboy originated from the Mexicans' traditions .... Cowboy came from the word Vaquero...That's why the teaching, learning, and understanding of Bizzell's contact zone is essential to authenticating one's culture, to establish history as it truly is....

Cultural names and local folkstories were used as thematic study. One good example was La Llorana (Yo-rona) or Weeping Lady who according to legend drowned her children because her European husband tried to take them. Remarkably, two other versions of the legend were offered by my students: Llorona drowns her children because her lover does not want them is one, while in another, Llorona drowns them because her spouse loved them more than her. Thus, for students and teacher alike, the legend was enriched and deepened by the intrinsic sense of Freierean "dialogue" at the heart of my method.

Add to Llorona the conquistador Hernando Cortez and his Mexican interpreter Dona Marina whose connections with Llorona

are deeply metaphorical. Llorona is the mythical personification of Dona Marina, the Aztec woman who is despicably called by many Latinos "La Malinche" -- the treacherous one -- because she acted as an interpreter and guide for Cortez' conquest of Mexico. Like Llorona, Dona Marina marries the European Cortez; there are children. Hence, Marina's place is one of love, yet betrayal to her people. She is the mystical mother of Hispanics who is also the murderer of a culture.

Contact zone studies of South Texas are a rich, resource for multicultural literature. We discuss, as in any other mono-cultural literature course, contextual, personal and cultural interpretations of literature. I know that my students have gained a wide range of connective knowledge. Recently, a student of mine suggested elemental items for a study that examines Gay culture and thé contact zone there in. As modern literature that exploration seems tempting.

The question my homeschooled son asked me some time ago still bothers me like a Bosch painting: "Who determines what is written as history?" he asked. "Those in power," I answered. However far learning extends, initial and critical studies in composition need to stretch the current boundaries so that we are sure to justly authenticate the many voices of our world, and by that establish lives worth living, asserting the right to be cognatively graced with inclusion. Such inclusion needs to be carefully deliberated and planned, not with only some in mind, but many in participation. I do not purport that my method here

offers the only way--but one based in personal knowledge. Canonical tokenism, however, needs to be avoided, for no culture likes to feel like an unwelcome guest in its own home.

References

Bizzell, P. (1994 February) "Contact Zones" and English Studies. College English. (52)2, 163-169.

Hart, J. (1982) Book Review. National Review. 34. pp. 305-307

Lathem, E.C., & Thompson, L. (Eds.). (1972). Birches. Robert Frost Poetry and Prose. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Trevino, A. (March 1977). Teaching the poem "Frost in the Rio Grande Valley." English Journal. 66(3) 69.

Paledes, K. (Ed). (1991 March 31) Mexico: Splendors of 30 centuries. San Antonio Express News. p. 24.